

Epitaph

"If we make it we can all sit back and laugh.

But I fear tomorrow I'll be crying."

Lego

I walked home crying.

The tears wouldn't stop—they just kept coming, an endless stream that blurred the city around me into smears of color and light. People passed by on the sidewalk, absorbed in their own lives, occasionally glancing at the crying figure with the crushed bouquet, but no one stopped. No one asked if I was okay. That was fine.

I didn't want anyone to ask. I didn't want to have to explain that I'd just had my heart broken by someone who didn't even know he was breaking it. That I'd overheard a conversation that revealed exactly how little I mattered. That I was walking home with flowers that had no purpose anymore, proof of a confession I'd never get to make.

My feet ached. I'd been standing all morning at the flower shop, moving constantly, never sitting down. And now I was walking—how far? How long? I didn't know. The route home was automatic, my body navigating while my mind spiraled.

I was tired. Bone-deep tired. The kind of exhaustion that came from more than just physical labor. The kind that settled into your soul and made everything feel heavier than it should be.

Did everyone feel this way when they met Tui? The question circled in my mind, jealous and bitter.

Was I just one in a long line of people captivated by his warmth, his steadiness, the way he looked at you like you were the only interesting thing in the room? Why couldn't I help it? Why had my heart decided, the moment I saw him, that this was the person worth breaking for?

He was so effortlessly magnetic. That steady presence, that quiet confidence, that warmth that made you feel like you mattered even when you probably didn't. How many other people had looked at him and felt their hearts skip? How many others had mistaken kindness for something more?

Was I just one in a long line of fools who fell for him?

Why couldn't I help but be captivated by him the moment I saw him?

I remembered that first meeting. The flower shop, months ago. Hong dragging me over to meet his coworker, his friend, this person I'd heard so much about. Tui had

looked up from whatever he was doing, and our eyes had met, and something in my chest had shifted.

Just like that.

No warning. No buildup. No chance to protect myself.

Love at first sight, people called it. Stupidity at first sight seemed more accurate now.

My heart pounded in my chest—too fast, too hard, demanding attention I didn't want to give it. I wanted to silence it somehow. Just as I wanted to quiet my mind. Both were impossible. Both kept racing, kept replaying, kept cycling through the same painful truths over and over. A kid. A flower-obsessed kid. Not my type. Nothing more than that.

I wanted to get to know him better. I wanted to be closer to him. To sit on his couch and not feel like an intruder. To make him coffee and not feel like a child playing house. To be seen as an equal, a partner, someone worthy of being chosen. That had been my hope. My plan. The thing I'd been working toward, slowly, carefully, trying not to scare him off.

But now everything felt silly. The flowers. The tea. The carefully curated interactions. All of it felt like a game I'd been playing alone, unaware that the rules had been set against me from the start. Every flower arrangement. Every visit to the studio. Every excuse I could find to cross paths, to share space, to exist in his orbit for just a little longer. All of it. The tea I'd given him. The texts we'd exchanged. The careful attention I'd paid to what he liked, what made him laugh, what made his eyes soften.

People kept treating me like a child. Tui. William. My parents. Even the well-meaning coworkers at the flower shop. Everyone saw the softness, the cartoons, the need for comfort, and assumed that was all there was. They didn't see the resilience required to maintain that softness in a world that wanted to harden you. They didn't see the strength it took to keep loving when love kept hurting you.

Maybe they were all right.

Maybe I was just a child playing at being an adult, fooling myself into thinking I could have the things that grown-ups had.

Maybe I needed to accept that some things weren't meant for me.

I got home earlier than expected. The twenty-minute walk felt incredibly short today—strange, given how heavy my feet felt, how much my legs ached. But the journey had passed in a blur, my body moving on autopilot while my mind was elsewhere.

Was it perhaps because I didn't stop at any point? Usually I took my time walking

home. Paused to pet stray cats. Lingered in front of shop windows. Let myself breathe between obligations. Today I hadn't stopped once. I'd just walked—head down, tears falling, bouquet clutched against my chest like a shield that wasn't working.

I entered my building. The lobby was quiet, as always. Just the mailboxes, the elevator, the particular stillness of a residential space in the middle of the afternoon.

But before I could reach the elevator, a voice stopped me.

"Young man."

I looked up, startled.

One of the building workers stood nearby—a gray-haired gentleman who helped with the cleaning. I'd seen him around, exchanged brief greetings, never really talked to him beyond the basics.

He was holding something.

"It's luck," he said, his voice kind and slightly awkward, the way people got when they weren't sure how to talk to young people. "Someone from the post office brought a package that couldn't be delivered." He moved around the lobby counter and handed me a box.

It was large—maybe two feet on each side—but not heavy. Lightweight, really. The kind of box that held something soft, something that wouldn't break.

"Thank you." I managed, sniffing.

My voice came out rough, evidence of the crying I'd been doing. And my eyes—I could imagine how they looked. Swollen. Red. The unmistakable face of someone who'd been sobbing for the past twenty minutes.

"Don't worry." the man replied.

He didn't ask questions. Didn't comment on my state. Just nodded and returned to whatever he'd been doing before I arrived. I was grateful for that. Grateful for small kindnesses from people who didn't require explanations.

I took the elevator instead of the stairs.

Usually I walked up—four flights wasn't that many, and I liked the exercise, the way it helped me transition from outside-world mode to home mode. But today my legs were too tired. My heart was too heavy. I couldn't face even one more step than absolutely necessary.

The elevator hummed as it climbed, the familiar sounds of mechanical ascent

surrounding me. I leaned against the wall, the box in my arms, the crushed bouquet still clutched in one hand. What a picture I must make, I thought bitterly. A crying kid with flowers and a mystery package, riding an elevator alone.

The doors opened on my floor. I walked down the hallway. Found my door. Unlocked it with hands that were still shaking. And finally, finally, I was home.

I entered my apartment. The space welcomed me with its familiar softness—the pastel colors, the stuffed animals, the careful curation of comfort that I'd built over years of needing somewhere safe.

I placed the box on the table.

My computer sat beside it, dark and waiting. And on the chair opposite, a teddy bear awaited me—one of many, positioned there because I liked the idea of coming home to something that was glad to see me. Even if that something was just a stuffed animal with button eyes.

I was returning to the only place where I felt safe.

Comforted.

Far from the pain the real world was causing me.

I showered. Not because I was dirty—I'd showered that morning—but because I needed to do something. Needed to feel water on my skin, needed the ritual of washing, needed to clean something even if that something was just metaphorical.

I avoided my hair. The braids were still intact, and I didn't have the energy to redo them. So I pinned them up and let the water run over my body, hot and steady, washing away the evidence of tears even as new ones continued to fall.

Wanting to clean something I didn't understand.

The humiliation. The rejection. The feeling of being seen as less-than by someone I'd thought might see me as equal.

None of it would wash away.

But the warm water helped, somehow. Made me feel a little more solid. A little more capable of continuing to exist.

I got dressed.

A loose black sweatshirt—oversized, comfortable, the kind of thing I wore when I needed to feel small and protected.

Comfortable gray shorts—the ones I usually wore when I knew my dance rehearsals were going to kill me, soft enough to move in, practical enough to survive hours of

physical work.

Slightly long white socks and sandals—an outfit choice that would horrify fashion-conscious people, but felt right for an evening of doing nothing.

I wasn't going anywhere. I wasn't seeing anyone. I could wear whatever I wanted.

I put on face cream. A little skincare—the kind of routine that usually made me feel put-together, cared for, like I was investing in myself even when no one else was. Today it just felt mechanical. Going through the motions. Doing the things I was supposed to do because that's what you did when your life fell apart—you kept moving, kept functioning, kept pretending that normalcy was possible.

I threw myself onto the bed. The mattress caught me, familiar and forgiving. The stuffed animals arranged around the headboard watched me with their button eyes, silent witnesses to whatever breakdown was about to happen.

I grabbed the nearest one—a soft, pastel purple teddy bear that lay within reach—and clutched it against my chest.

There were so many things I'd wanted to say to Tui.

I'm not a child. I've lived alone since I was sixteen. I manage my own life. I've survived things you don't even know about.

The thought surfaced, bringing with it a fresh wave of grief. All the conversations I'd imagined. All the confessions I'd rehearsed in my head. All the moments I'd pictured—sitting across from him, looking into his eyes, finally finding the courage to say I like you and seeing what happened next.

But I couldn't even stand in front of him. I'd frozen on those stairs. Heard those words. And run away before I could face the rejection in person. Couldn't find the voice to defend myself. I'd just run away, like the child he thought I was.

Maybe that was for the best. Maybe it was worse.

I didn't know.

The tears started falling again.

They came uncontrollably now. Great heaving sobs that shook my whole body, that soaked the pillow beneath my head, that seemed to come from somewhere deeper than I'd known existed.

They seemed to fill my entire mind for now.

No room for anything else. No room for logic or perspective or the rational voice that usually helped me function.

Just pain. Just grief.

Just the overwhelming weight of wanting something I couldn't have.

And I couldn't seem to do anything. That was the worst part. The helplessness. The feeling that the world was happening to me, rather than something I could shape or influence or control.

I never did. The realization hit with unexpected force, bringing with it memories I usually kept locked away.

I never complained to my parents.

Even though I was scared of living alone so young. Sixteen years old, shipped off to an apartment in the city while they sorted out their divorce. Too young to be on my own. Too inconvenient to keep around. They'd framed it as independence, as an opportunity, as proof that they trusted me. But I knew the truth.

They just didn't want to deal with me. And I'd said nothing. Accepted the arrangement. Pretended I was fine when I was terrified, when the nights felt endless, when every sound in the empty apartment made me jump.

I never said anything when William was young and played rough and ended up with bruises.

We were just kids then—thirteen, maybe fourteen. William had always been intense, always had trouble controlling his emotions. Sometimes our roughhousing went too far. Sometimes I went home with marks on my arms that I covered with long sleeves.

I never told anyone.

William was my friend. My best friend. The only person who understood what it felt like to be abandoned by the people who were supposed to love you. I couldn't risk losing him by complaining. So I stayed quiet. Absorbed the pain. Told myself it was just how boys played, just how our friendship worked.

I never said anything when my parents remarried and had more children. Seemingly erasing me from existence and only sending money. New families. New babies. New priorities that didn't include the awkward teenager they'd created together and then cast aside.

I got bank transfers. Occasional texts. A birthday card, probably sent by an assistant. But I never saw them. Never met my half-siblings. Never existed in their new lives except as a line item in a budget, a problem solved with regular deposits. I never said a word. Never called them out. Never demanded more. Never asked why money was supposed to be a substitute for love.

I never said a word when they erased my older sister's existence after her funeral.

That one hurt the most.

My sister—the one they'd actually cared about. The one whose illness had consumed all their attention and resources. The one who'd died too young, leaving behind a family that fell apart in her absence. After the funeral, it was like she'd never existed. No photos on the walls. No mentions of her name. Just a heavy silence where her memory should have been. I just stared at the beautiful wreath and wept. The flowers I'd helped arrange. The last gift I could give to someone who couldn't receive it.

And I'd said nothing.

Because what was there to say?

I stood up.

Still clutching the bear.

The box on the table was waiting—the package I'd forgotten about in my spiral into grief. Something that had been delivered, something I should probably open. I found a box cutter in the kitchen drawer and returned to the table. The cardboard parted easily under the blade, revealing packing material inside. Tissue paper. Bubble wrap. The careful protection of something someone thought was fragile. There was a note on top.

Happy Birthday - Mom.

I stared at the words.

It wasn't even my birthday.—she'd sent this early. Either because she'd forgotten when my actual birthday was, or because she'd wanted to check the obligation off her list ahead of time.

Probably the latter. The package had probably been assembled by one of her employees. Ordered online, wrapped by someone who didn't know me, sent to fulfill a duty rather than express love.

Happy Birthday.

The words felt hollow. Mocking.

Mom.

Was she still that? Was the word "mom" even accurate for someone who'd chosen a new family, a new life, a new existence that didn't include me?

I reached into the box and took out the gift. It was a stuffed animal. A Care Bear.

Dark purple, with a symbol on its belly I recognized immediately.

Then I looked at my sofa.

Among the other stuffed animals, next to a yellow Care Bear, sat the exact same one. Same color. Same size. Same symbol. She'd sent me a duplicate of a toy I already owned.

I felt tears welling up again—fresh ones, hot with a different kind of pain. The pain of being known so little by the people who were supposed to know you best. She knew I liked Care Bears. She didn't know which ones I had. She didn't know me.

Through my tears, I took a picture of the new bear.

I opened my mother's chat.

Me: [Photo attached] Thank you.

I sent it quickly, it had probably just been sent by one of her employees under her orders anyway. An assistant checking a box on a spreadsheet. Send gift to son. Done.

I picked up the new stuffed animal and walked over to the sofa. I placed it next to its twin. They sat there, identical and cheerful, staring back at me with plastic eyes. "You have a twin," I whispered to the old one, laughing softly through my tears. The sound was wet and broken. "Now you won't be alone."

Unlike me.

Then my phone rang.

The sound cut through the silence of my apartment, sharp and intrusive. For a moment, I just stared at it—the device vibrating against the kitchen counter, an unknown number flashing across the screen. I didn't want to answer. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I wanted to curl up with my stuffed animals and disappear into the soft, safe world I'd built for myself. But something made me reach for it anyway.

"Hello?"

"Young Lego?" the voice on the other end asked. I recognized it immediately, even though it sounded different through the phone—slightly distorted, slightly distant, but unmistakably familiar. William's manager. The woman who handled his gallery showings, his commissions, his professional life. The one who'd been trying to coax him back into the world of the living for months now.

"Yes?" I said, sitting up straighter, clutching the phone tighter.

"I'm sorry to call you unexpectedly." She didn't sound sorry; she sounded efficient, like someone ticking items off a crisis checklist. "William is due to deliver some of



his paintings for shipment on Friday—the final selections for the exhibition. But he's not answering his calls or messages. I tried sending emails, marked urgent, but they went unanswered. I even went to his apartment an hour ago, but he's not answering the door."

I heard her sigh—a short, sharp exhale of frustration mixed with genuine worry.

"Have you been able to contact him this week?" The question made my stomach churn. Acid rose in my throat.

The question hit me like a physical blow, making my stomach churn violently. A wave of nausea rolled over me. I hadn't been in touch with William—not a text, not a call, nothing—since the day everything happened, the day the world seemed to tilt on its axis. My anxiety, which had been a low hum, suddenly roared into a deafening crescendo.

My heart began to beat faster. "I—I haven't spoken to him in days." I whispered. The confession felt like a betrayal, though I wasn't sure who I was betraying—him, for abandoning him, or myself, for admitting the distance between us.

I could almost hear her calculating, assessing the severity of the situation. "I see." she said finally. "I'll try to contact him again through other channels. If you hear anything from him—anything at all—please let me know immediately."

"I will. Thank you." I managed to say, but she had already hung up before I could ask any further questions or offer an explanation.

The silence that followed felt heavier than before. The apartment that had felt like a sanctuary moments ago now felt suffocating. The pastel colors seemed too bright. The stuffed animals seemed to be watching me with accusation in their button eyes.

I lowered the phone, my hand trembling, and looked across the room at the two bears sitting together on the sofa. Identical. Alone together, They looked so peaceful, so undisturbed. Then, a sharp memory pierced through the fog of my panic: the spare key sitting at the very bottom of my bag.

Buried at the bottom of my bag, under receipts and lip balm and the debris of daily life. The key I had never used. The key for emergencies.

In case I can't open it myself.

The unspoken fear that lived between us—that one day he might not be able to answer the door, and someone would need to check on him. I'd promised myself I'd never need to use it.

I stood up, feeling a little dizzy on the way—the lack of food catching up to me again, or maybe just the sudden rush of adrenaline. It was 4:40 on a normal Wednesday afternoon; I had already eaten and even had a snack, theoretically. But

my body felt hollow.

Today I'd had nothing but water and tears.

Moving with a sudden, jerky urgency. I threw away the dirty handkerchief, took out a new one to blow my nose, trying to clear the congestion of crying. I grabbed my bag—my things were still there, the wallet, the lip balm—except for my cell phone and my own keys, which were on the kitchen counter next to the flowers.

I gathered everything. My hands were shaking.

The flowers. The crushed bouquet sat there, wilting and sad, a reminder of the confession I'd never made. I stared at them for a moment, feeling that familiar ache rise in my chest. But I pushed it down. Pushed it aside. There wasn't room for that pain right now. There wasn't time. I picked up the flowers—the Nerium and Baby's Breath I hadn't given to anyone.

I grabbed my bag, clutching it like a lifeline. Just to avoid the crushing anxiety of stepping into the outside world alone, I reached for a small, flimsy white rabbit plushie—a secondhand treasure I'd bought on a whim—and shoved it deep inside my bag for comfort. I tucked the rabbit inside, nestling it between my wallet and my tissues. I picked up the flowers, glancing one last time at the two teddy bears on the sofa, and then at the ones resting on my table. They seemed to be staring back at me, their button eyes almost encouraging me, urging me to go.

Be brave.

I left the apartment, pulling the door shut quickly behind me and practically running down the stairs, skipping steps in my haste. The first floor was completely empty, echoing with the sound of my movement. I walked past the lobby quickly, the rubber soles of my flip-flops clacking loudly against the tiled floor, a frantic rhythm in the quiet building. My flip-flops clacked loudly on the tile floor—too loud, each step echoing in the empty space like an announcement of my departure. The sound followed me all the way to the front door.

I burst outside into the fresh air and immediately hailed a taxi. I sat on the edge of the seat the entire ride, watching the city blur past until we arrived.

What if he's hurt? What if he's done something?

I sat in the back seat, clutching my bag, watching the streets go by. The flowers lay across my lap, their petals leaving small traces on my gray shorts. My phone was in my hand, and I kept checking it—hoping for a message from William, hoping for some sign that he was okay, hoping that this was all a misunderstanding and I was panicking over nothing.

Nothing came.

I got out a little before William's apartment building, needing a moment to breathe, to prepare. I went into a cafe on the corner—fancy, expensive, the kind of place William's father would have approved of. My mind was racing, unable to focus, so I bought sandwiches—four of them, simply because I couldn't make a decision and panic made me impulsive. I grabbed the bestsellers, hoping they would be enough. I also bought a bottled coffee and a cold iced tea, stuffing everything into my bag until it bulged, the cold bottles pressing against the soft fur of the bunny plushie.

When I finally entered the lobby of William's building, the atmosphere changed. There were people everywhere—people in expensive, tailored clothes, looking just like his parents used to look when he was young. They wore serious, unreadable faces and fabrics that cost more than my rent. I kept my head down and hurried toward the elevator, desperate to escape their scrutiny.

I hurried to the elevator, pressing the button repeatedly as if that would make it arrive faster.

I looked at myself in the reflective walls. My cheeks were flushed a bright red from running, and I looked chaotic, carrying far too many things. My hands were turning a light, mottled pink from the strain of the heavy cafeteria bags cutting into my fingers.

Please be okay, I thought. Please, please be okay.

When the elevator chimed and I arrived at William's floor, I let out a shaky sigh when I saw the hallway was empty. That solitude eased some of my anxiety, if only for a second. My greatest fear, ever since my best friend had retreated into the fortress of his apartment, was that one day I would arrive to find the corridor filled with paramedics and police at his door. But it was empty, I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding. My knees felt weak with relief—a relief so profound it almost made me dizzy. Because this was my fear, the nightmare that had lived in the back of my mind ever since William had started retreating from the world.

The polished floor gleaming under the artificial lights, silent and still.

I walked down the corridor, my footsteps muffled by the thick carpet.

I reached his door and knocked three times. The sound was loud in the silent hallway—three sharp raps that echoed off the walls and faded into nothing. I waited, holding my breath, straining to hear any response from inside. A footstep. A voice. Any sign of life.

I knocked again.

"P'Will?" I called, my voice cracking on his name. "It's Lego, Please open the door." My voice sounding thin. Still nothing. My hands were shaking now—trembling so badly that I could barely hold onto the bags.

Barely able to move because of the flowers and bags filling my arms, I shifted the weight awkwardly and searched for the specific set of keys in the depths of my bag. When my fingers finally brushed against the cold metal, I pulled them out and looked at them in my palm. I was sweating profusely now, my hands trembling so bad I almost dropped them, and yet I felt bitterly cold, a chill radiating from my bones. William's keys. A small set—just two keys on a simple ring, nothing fancy, nothing special. But they felt heavy in my hand. Heavy with meaning. Heavy with the trust that William had placed in me when he'd handed them over. Heavy with the fear of what I might find when I used them.

But even with anxiety in my throat—thick and choking, making it hard to swallow—and in the pit of my stomach—twisting and churning, threatening to bring up whatever was left in my empty belly—I raised the key to the lock. My hand shook so badly that it took three tries to get the key into the slot.

I turned it, the lock clicked, I opened the door.

When I finally pushed the heavy door open, a suffocating, almost tangible silence greeted me. It wasn't just quiet; it was the kind of heavy stillness that presses against your eardrums. The entryway, usually pristine, was littered with black plastic trash bags, piled haphazardly against the wall like a barricade. I stepped inside, closing the door softly behind me, and walked slowly down the hallway, making a conscious effort to steady my erratic breathing, forcing air in and out of my lungs in a measured rhythm.

I stepped into the living room and stopped. It looked less like a home and more like a storage unit in the middle of a move. Dozens of paintings were already wrapped and prepped for travel. Some were encased in thick cardboard boxes, taped shut with aggressive lines of packing tape; others were swaddled in layers of bubble wrap, distorting the images beneath. Some canvases were resting on the sofa, waiting their turn to be packed, while others leaned precariously against the walls, the scent of oil paint still fresh in the air, indicating they were not yet completely dry.

I moved deeper into the apartment. The kitchen was a disaster zone, the sink and counters overflowing with a mountain of dirty dishes that looked like they had been accumulating for days. In stark contrast, the dining room table was wiped spotless, a lone island of order in the chaos. I unburdened myself, leaving my heavy bags on the polished wood. My eyes were drawn to the center of the table where the flower vase still sat. My old bouquet, the one I had brought weeks ago, was now dead; gray, withered petals were scattered across the table like dry confetti. The water inside the vase had turned a murky brown and emitted a faint, pungent smell of decay.

I continued my search. The door to the study was wide open, revealing a room that looked as if a whirlwind had violently passed through it—papers, sketches, and

pencils were strewn everywhere. I scanned the room desperately, but William wasn't in sight. I moved to the bedroom; the door was ajar. Inside, the bed linens looked stark white and freshly changed, but the laundry basket in the corner was overflowing, with dirty clothes spilling out onto the floor. But William wasn't there. The bed was empty, the room was still.

Panic began to rise in my throat again. The only place left was the bathroom. The door was closed tight. I stood before it and strained my ears, but I couldn't hear a sound—no running water, no movement, nothing. I instinctively put my hands to my chest, pressing down; I hadn't realized until that moment just how violently my heart was hammering against my ribs or how rapid and shallow my breathing had become. My chest actually ached from the tension, and my fingertips felt numb and tingling.

I put my hands to my chest, pressing my palms flat against my sternum as if I could physically slow my heart. I hadn't noticed until that moment how fast my heart was beating—racing, really, pounding against my ribs like a caged animal trying to escape. I hadn't noticed how fast I was breathing either, quick shallow gasps that weren't giving me enough oxygen, making me feel lightheaded and detached from my own body. My chest hurt, a tight band of pain wrapped around my ribs, and my hands were numb, the fingers tingling with pins and needles from the anxiety coursing through my system.

I knocked on the door, three soft raps with my trembling knuckles, the sound almost swallowed by the silence of the apartment.

"William?" I called, my voice cracking, barely louder than a whisper. "William, are you in there? Please... please say something."

With trembling fingers, I reached out and turned the handle. It was unlocked. I pushed the door open and the breath rushed out of me. William was there. He was lying in the dry bathtub, curled up and still wearing his wrinkled pajamas. His hair was longer than I remembered, falling messily over his forehead, and clutched tightly in his fist was his cell phone, the screen shattering into a spiderweb of cracks. I stared at his chest—it rose and fell rhythmically. He was breathing. He was asleep. In the stark, cold light of the bathroom, he looked like the most peaceful person I had seen in months, completely detached from the chaos outside the door.

His hair was longer than I remembered, grown out past his ears and curling slightly at the ends, unwashed and tangled. It fell across his forehead, hiding part of his face, and I resisted the urge to reach out and brush it away. His skin was pale—paler than usual, a sickly pallor that spoke of days or weeks without sunlight.

The relief that flooded through me was so intense that my legs gave out. I collapsed, my knees hitting the cold bathroom floor with a painful thump that I barely registered. The tiles were hard and unforgiving, sending shocks of cold

through my body, but I didn't care. I couldn't care. I could only stare at William, watching the rise and fall of his chest, watching him breathe. I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them, rocking slightly.

I sat there, watching him sleep, my back against the bathroom wall, the cold of the tiles seeping through my clothes and into my bones.

I don't know how long I sat there on the floor with my knees drawn up to my chest, my arms wrapped around my shins, my chin resting on my kneecaps. Time seemed to lose all meaning in that small, dim bathroom. The light from the window shifted slowly, the shadows lengthening, the quality of the illumination changing from golden to gray as evening deepened into twilight. I watched the light move across the tiles, watched it climb the walls, watched it fade.

I watched William breathe. In and out. In and out. The most beautiful rhythm I'd ever witnessed.

Eventually, the silence was broken by my own stomach growling loudly. The sound snapped me out of my trance. I slowly got up, my muscles stiff. I got up slowly, carefully, trying not to make any noise that might disturb William's sleep. My joints protested the movement, stiff from sitting in one position for so long, my muscles aching and my back complaining. My feet had fallen asleep, and I had to stand still for a moment, leaning against the doorframe, waiting for the pins and needles to subside before I could walk. I went back to the kitchen and shoved the mess on the counters aside, moving everything into the already full sink to make space. I took the vase of dead flowers, threw the rotting stems into the trash, and scrubbed the glass until it sparkled. Then, I arranged the fresh flowers I had bought, filling the vase with cool, clean water. The new blooms seemed to perk up instantly, as if thanking me for not squeezing the life out of them anymore and for finally giving them a little care and hydration.

I arranged them as best I could, my fingers gentle as I coaxed the damaged stems into something resembling an artful display. It wasn't my best work—not by a long shot. But it was something. A spot of color in the gray apartment. A reminder that living things could survive even when they'd been mishandled.

They seemed to be thanking me.

I know that sounds silly. Flowers don't have feelings. Flowers don't have thoughts. They're just plants, just organic matter, just arrangements of cells that happen to be beautiful. But in that moment, as I adjusted them in the clean vase and watched them settle into their new home, I could have sworn I felt something like gratitude emanating from their petals.

Thank you, they seemed to say, for not squeezing us anymore. Thank you for giving us a little care. Thank you for the water. I smiled at them—a small, tired smile that

felt foreign on my face after so many hours of worry.

I washed my hands afterward, scrubbing them thoroughly at the kitchen sink, washing away the smell of dead flowers and the residue of anxiety. The warm water felt good, soothing, grounding me in the present moment. I dried them on a relatively clean dish towel I found hanging from the oven handle.

When I was done, I dried my hands on a paper towel—I didn't trust the hand towel hanging by the sink; it looked like it hadn't been washed in weeks—and turned my attention to the food.

I unpacked the sandwiches and opened the iced tea. Then, balancing the food and the bag with the bunny plushie, I walked back to the bathroom.

I sat down on the floor again, resuming my post, drawing my knees back to my chest. I ate the sandwiches and drank the tea in small, quiet sips, keeping my eyes fixed on William in the tub. If anyone else saw me right now—eating lunch on a bathroom floor next to a sleeping man in a tub—they would probably say I was disgusting, or at least pathetic. But I knew that if my aunt, William's mother, were here, she wouldn't judge me. She would probably smile sadly, sit down on the tiles next to me, rub my back, and drink tea right alongside me, waiting for him to wake up.

The second sandwich tasted better than the first—my stomach had settled, had remembered how to process food, had stopped protesting the end of its involuntary fast. I ate slowly, methodically, savoring each bite in a way I rarely did. The tea was sweeter than I usually preferred, but I finished it anyway, needing the sugar, needing the energy it would provide.

If someone saw me, they'd say I was disgusting.

Eating on a bathroom floor. In someone else's apartment. Next to a bathtub where a person was sleeping—not using it for its intended purpose, but treating it as a bed, as a hiding place, as a cocoon against the world. There was nothing normal about this scene. Nothing sanitary. Nothing that would make sense to an outside observer.

A stranger would have recoiled. Would have wondered what was wrong with me, why I would choose to consume food in such a setting, why I didn't find a proper table or at least a clean surface. They would have made assumptions about my hygiene, my mental state, my basic understanding of appropriate behavior.

They wouldn't have understood. They couldn't have understood.

But my aunt would have.

My aunt—William's mother—would have known exactly why I was sitting on that floor. She would have recognized the vigil I was keeping, the devotion that kept me

close to her son even when closer wasn't comfortable. She would have seen the love in my strange choice of dining location.

William's mother would probably rub my back and sit and drink tea next to me.

I could picture it so clearly. Her hand, warm and gentle, making slow circles between my shoulder blades. Her presence, solid and reassuring, settling onto the tile beside me without complaint or judgment. She would bring her own cup of tea—something herbal, probably, something calming—and she would sip it slowly while we watched over her son together.

She wouldn't ask questions I couldn't answer. She wouldn't demand explanations I didn't have.

She would just be there. That was what I missed most about her—not the big gestures or the dramatic moments, but the simple, steady presence. The way she could walk into a room and make everything feel a little bit safer. The way she looked at her son, at me, at anyone lucky enough to fall within her circle of care, with eyes that said you matter and I'm here and everything is going to be okay.

I missed her. I missed having someone who understood.

I took another bite of my sandwich and let the tears fall.

Pathetic. Gross. The kind of behavior that proved how strange I was, how childish, how unable to function like a normal adult.

She'd never been like the rest of the family—never cold, never dismissive, never too busy for the children who needed her. When my parents had been fighting, when the house had been filled with screaming and slammed doors, I'd escape to her apartment. She'd make me tea and sit with me in whatever strange place I'd chosen to hide—a closet, a corner, once the space under her dining room table.

She never told me I was being weird.

She just... joined me. Sat down on the floor beside me, or crawled under the table, or squeezed into whatever cramped space I'd found. She'd rub my back in slow, soothing circles and drink her tea and let me exist without judgment.

"Sometimes," she'd said once, "we need to be small. We need to hide. That's okay, little one. That's okay."

The one person in our family who'd understood us, who'd loved us without conditions, who'd made us feel safe—gone.

No wonder William was struggling. No wonder he'd retreated from the world, curled himself into a bathtub like he was trying to make himself as small as possible. He was looking for safety. Looking for the comfort that his mother had provided, the



comfort that no one else had ever been able to give.

I wished I could give it to him.

I wished I could be what she had been—a source of unconditional love, a safe harbor in the storm. But I was barely keeping myself together. Barely functioning. Barely surviving my own pain, let alone taking on someone else's.

But I was here.

That had to count for something.

I finished my sandwich. Drank the rest of my tea. Wiped my hands on my shorts because I didn't want to get up again, didn't want to leave, didn't want to break the strange peace of this moment.

Then I reached into my bag and pulled out the white rabbit plushie. It was soft against my fingers—worn and slightly matted, but comforting in the way that only well-loved things could be. I held it against my chest, feeling its familiar weight, its familiar texture. And I sat there on the cold bathroom floor, watching William breathe, waiting for him to wake up.

The shadows in the bathroom grew longer, stretching across the white tiles like reaching fingers. The light from the small window turned a deep, bruised purple, then faded into the charcoal gray of early evening. I didn't turn on the light. I didn't want to startle him. I didn't want to break the cocoon of dim safety we were sharing.

I squeezed the rabbit's ear between my thumb and forefinger. The synthetic fur was soft, a tactile anchor in a world that felt increasingly sharp and jagged.

I thought about Tui.

The thought came unbidden, an unwanted guest in this quiet vigil. I thought about his smile, the one that I had convinced myself was special, the one I had foolishly believed was directed at me with something more than just politeness. I thought about the flowers I had carried, the foolish hope that had bloomed in my chest like a weed, only to be torn out by the roots.

I was already crying. I had been crying all day, internally if not externally. But looking at William, curled up in the porcelain curve of the bathtub, I realized that my tears felt selfish. Here was my best friend, sinking into the quicksand of his own mind, and I was mourning a romance that had never even existed.

The light had shifted from gray to the deep blue of early evening when William finally stirred. I saw it happen in slow motion—the flutter of his eyelids, the small furrow that appeared between his brows, the way his fingers tightened around the cracked phone still clutched in his hand. His breathing changed, becoming less even, more conscious. He was surfacing from wherever he'd been hiding.

I held my breath. I didn't move. Didn't speak. Just watched, holding my breath, clutching the rabbit plushie against my chest like a child waiting for permission to exist.

His eyes opened. For a moment, they were unfocused, staring at the ceiling without really seeing it. Then they found me—I sat motionless on the cold tile floor, frozen in place like a statue or a deer caught in headlights. The bunny plushie was pressed against my chest with both hands, its floppy ears drooping over my fingers. The remains of my bathroom picnic were scattered around me—the sandwich wrapper, the empty tea bottle, the bag I'd brought with its jumbled contents. My knees were still drawn up to my chest, my arms wrapped around them, making me look small and young and probably ridiculous.

I must have looked like a hallucination. A specter from his childhood come to haunt his bathroom. A ghost made of memory and worry, materialized on his tile floor with snacks and stuffed animals like some fever-dream version of a guardian angel. The kind of vision that appears when the medication is too strong or the isolation has gone on too long—familiar and impossible all at once.

Neither of us spoke. We just looked at each other across the small space of the bathroom, the distance between the tub and the wall where I sat feeling both infinitely vast and impossibly small. The silence stretched between us, filled with everything we weren't saying, everything we couldn't say, everything that had built up over days and weeks and months of not saying it.

"Lego?" His voice was a ruin.

The single word, my name, came out fractured and rough, splintered around the edges like broken glass. There was rust in it, disuse, the deterioration that came from too many hours of silence. But underneath all that damage, underneath the cracks and the dryness and the neglect, there was something else. Something that sounded almost like hope. Almost like relief. Almost like he'd been waiting for someone to appear, and here I was.

"Hi, P'Will." I whispered back. My voice wasn't much better than his. Thick with tears I'd been crying off and on for hours

"The new medication keeps giving me strange dreams." he told me. He didn't sit up. Didn't make any move to change his position in the bathtub, as if the effort required was more than he could manage right now. He just lay there, curled on his side, his head turned toward me, his eyes never leaving my face.

He just stared at me. He was just William.

The vulnerability in his gaze made my chest ache. Made me want to reach out and smooth the worry lines from his forehead, brush the tangled hair from his eyes, promise him that everything was going to be okay even though I had no way of

knowing if that was true.

He looked at me for a long while. Then, slowly, with visible effort, he began to move.

But he managed it, propping himself on one elbow, lifting his torso just enough to change the angle between us. And then he stretched out his hand. His arm extended toward me, reaching across the space that separated us, his fingers stretching toward my face. His hand was shaking—a fine tremor that spoke of weakness and emotion and perhaps the effects of whatever medication he'd mentioned—but it moved with purpose, with intention, with the clear goal of making contact. His cold hands touched my cheek.

His eyes searched my face, moving from feature to feature, cataloging every detail. His brow was furrowed again, that familiar expression of concentration mixed with something else—wonder, maybe, or disbelief. "You're real," he said.

I nodded, unable to speak past the lump in my throat. Fresh tears began to fall—warm tracks of moisture that slid down my cheeks and over his fingers, wetting his cold skin with the evidence of my emotion. I couldn't stop them. Didn't try to stop them. After the day I'd had, after the hours of worry and fear and the relief of finding him alive, I had no defenses left. No walls. No ability to pretend I was okay when I so clearly wasn't.

His thumb moved, gently wiping at the tears as they fell, a futile gesture since new ones replaced them immediately. But the attempt itself—the care behind it, the tenderness—made me cry harder.

"I'm sorry," he told me.

His voice cracked on the words, fracturing like thin ice over deep water. His face changed as he spoke—the vulnerability shifting into something more complex, something that looked like guilt and shame and grief all tangled together. His eyes, which had been soft with wonder a moment ago, now shone with their own unshed tears, glassy and bright in the dim bathroom light.

"I'm sorry," he said again, as if once wasn't enough, as if he needed to repeat it to make it real. "I'm so sorry, Lego. I didn't mean to—I wasn't trying to—"

The words stumbled over each other, tripping and falling, unable to form a coherent sentence. His hand was still on my face, trembling more now, and I could see the effort it was taking him to keep it there, to maintain this connection between us.

"I just wanted to sleep," he whispered. "I just wanted it to stop for a while. The noise in my head. The pressure. The expectations. Everything. I just wanted it to be quiet."

I understood in a way I wished I didn't, in a way that came from my own dark

moments, my own nights when the world felt too loud and the only escape seemed to be unconsciousness. I understood the appeal of sleep—real sleep, deep sleep, the kind that pulled you under and held you there away from all the things that hurt.

"I know." I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I know, P'Will."

"Your manager called me," I said, the words tumbling out now that the dam had broken. "She was worried. She said you weren't answering. She said—she said you had paintings to deliver, and no one could reach you, and she'd come to your door but you didn't answer, and I—"

I had to stop, had to swallow, had to breathe.

"I was so scared." I admitted, and the truth of it rang through the small bathroom like a bell. "I was so scared of what I might find. When I came in and I couldn't—when you weren't in the living room or the bedroom or the study, and the bathroom door was closed, I thought—" I couldn't finish the sentence.

But I didn't have to finish it. William understood. Of course he understood. He'd lived with that fear himself, on the other side of it—the knowledge that people who loved him were afraid of what they might find, the guilt that came with putting that fear in their hearts.

"I'm still here," he said softly. "I'm still here, Lego. I promise. I wasn't—I didn't—" He shook his head, frustrated with his inability to articulate what he meant. "The tub is... grounding," he tried to explain. "The porcelain. The cold. It's like... it's like being held. The pressure on all sides. It helps when everything feels too big. I just... I lay down to feel contained, and I fell asleep. That's all. I just fell asleep."

"The medication makes me sleep so deep," he continued, his voice growing steadier now, as if the act of explaining was helping him find his footing. "Deeper than I've ever slept. It's like falling into a well. I don't hear my phone. I don't hear knocking. I just... I go away for a while. And when I come back, I don't always know how much time has passed."

"Have you eaten?" I asked, latching onto something practical, something I could address. "When did you last eat?"

He thought about it, his face scrunching with the effort of remembering. "There was... takeout? At some point? I think I ordered."

I thought about the containers I'd seen in the kitchen, the ones I'd shoved into the sink with the rest of the dirty dishes.

"I brought sandwiches," I said. "From the cafe down the street. And coffee. And tea. You need to eat something, P'Will. You need to drink something."

I started to get up, but his hand on my cheek tightened, his fingers curling against

my skin, holding me in place.

"Wait," he said. "Just—wait. One more minute. Please."

I settled back down, my heart aching at the desperation in his voice. He looked at me with those dark, vulnerable eyes, and I saw everything he wasn't saying—the loneliness, the fear, the overwhelming relief of not being alone anymore.

"I thought I dreamed you," he whispered. "Before I opened my eyes. I thought I dreamed that someone was here, that someone was watching over me, that I wasn't alone anymore. And when I woke up and you were really here—" His voice broke.

"I thought I'd finally lost it," he confessed. "I thought my mind had given up and started creating companions to keep me company. Because why would you be here? After everything—after I pushed everyone away, after I stopped answering calls, after I disappeared into this apartment like it was a tomb—why would anyone still be here?"

"Because I love you." I said simply. The words came out without thought, without hesitation, without the careful consideration I usually gave to declarations of any kind. They just fell out of my mouth, true and plain and absolutely undeniable.

"You're my family," I continued, the tears still falling, my voice thick with emotion. "You're my friend. You're the person who taught me that it was okay to be soft in a hard world. You're the one who held my hand at my sister's funeral when no one else would even look at me. You're the one who let me hide in your studio when my parents were too busy with their new families to remember I existed. You're—you're everything, P'Will. You're everything that's left of the people who actually mattered. And I'm not going to let you disappear. I'm not. I refuse."

He stared at me, his eyes overflowing now, tears tracking down his pale cheeks and dripping onto the porcelain beneath him. "When did you get so brave?" he asked, his voice wondering. "When did you learn to say things like that?"

I laughed—a wet, broken sound that was more sob than humor. "I'm not brave. I'm terrified. I'm terrified all the time. But I'm more afraid of losing you than I am of saying something vulnerable. So I guess—I guess that means the fear of one thing outweighs the fear of another."

His thumb brushed across my cheek again, catching a fresh tear. "You're braver than you know, little one," he said, using the old endearment his mother used to call me, the one that always made me feel safe and seen. "You've always been braver than you know."